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SPEECH

OF

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HON. S. A. SMITH, OF TENNESSEE,

IN DEFENSE OF THE ADMINISTRATION IN THE ORGANIZATION
OF THE HOUSE.

DELIVERED

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JANUARY 9, 1856.

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SPEECH

Mr. SMITH said: Mr. Clerk, I rise for the purpose of making a personal explanation, and, as this motion for a call of the House is evidently for the purpose of allowing members time to come in, this is the best time to make it. If the House, therefore, will indulge me at this time, I promise to be as brief as possible. [Cries of "Go on!" "Consent!"] A few days ago, it will be remembered—or, if it is not remembered, it is upon the record—I voted against laying upon the table a resolution introduced by the honorable gentleman from Alabama, [Mr. WALKER,] nominating for Speaker my friend from South Carolina, [Mr. BOYCE.] In doing so, I, to some extent, separated myself in that particular from a large majority of the Democratic party in this House. Some censure was, for the moment, cast upon me for that act, though I believe no Democrat who voted against laying that resolution on the table was suspected even of an intention to waver from his support of the regular nominee of the Democratic party.

Now, sir, the reason why I gave that vote I want to furnish; and I want to do it for this purpose: there has been a shrewd, ingenious, but deliberate attempt made to cast the responsibility of the non-organization of this House upon the Democratic party and upon the Administration—upon the President. When the gentleman from Alabama [Mr. WALKER] first made the remark which he did here, in relation to the responsibility of the want of organization of this body, the Democratic party had said nothing upon the subject. They had attempted to throw the responsibility upon no one of the contending parties in the House. They were willing—and they did

it—to sit here and vote, and to stand by their platform, and to stand by their candidate, the gentleman from Illinois, [Mr. RICHARDSON.] We had struggled here for some time; and though no result had been accomplished, each party had succeeded to some extent in defining its own position. But, sir, to my astonishment and regret, I find that a party here, agreeing with us in sentiment, as they say, in relation to the great question that now agitates and divides the country, instead of making war upon the Black Republicans, as they are called, attempt most ingeniously to cast the odium upon the Democratic party for the failure that has occurred to organize the House. And that attempt having been promoted by two of my colleagues from Tennessee—the honorable gentleman [Mr. ZOLLICOFFER] who represents the Nashville district, for whom I have the highest respect, and my honorable colleague, [Mr. ETHERIDGE,] who proposed Mr. MILLSON the other day—I say that the attempt to throw this odium upon the Democrats having been promoted by these two gentlemen, I desire to show the perfect and utter fallacy of any such charge against the Administration or the Democratic party.

Mr. Clerk, if there is a Democrat in this House who does not most earnestly desire an organization, I know not who he is. I should, however, not say a word upon this point in relation to the Administration, but for a charge that has been made in the leading organ of that once very respectable but now defunct organization, known as the Whig party—that the Administration is responsible for our want of organization. But, sir, as that charge has been made from so respectable a source, and as it has become a prominent

charge against the Administration, I take this occasion to say, that, though I am not authorized to speak for the President nor for the Administration, I speak what *I know* when I say that there is no member of this body who more earnestly desires the speedy organization of the House than the President of the United States. I speak what I know when I make this statement, though I am authorized to speak for no one but myself; but, sir, I am anxious to see the House organize; and why the attempt should be made by this Know Nothing party, as it is called, to throw upon us the responsibility of the failure thus far, I cannot see.

Sir, strange things have occurred here, which ought to go to the country. Here are two parties opposed to the Democratic party of the House. Of course I do not refer to every individual in those parties; but I say that those who are called Black Republicans in this House owe their election here to *Know Nothingism*.

MR. TRAFTON. I should like to ask the gentleman from Tennessee what he means by that expression?

MR. SMITH. By what expression?

MR. TRAFTON. Black Republicans.

MR. SMITH. I mean those gentlemen who have been voting for Mr. BANKS; they have been called Black Republicans. I use the term in all courtesy.

MR. TRAFTON. Who calls them Black Republicans? That is the question.

MR. SMITH. I use the expression in all courtesy. The reason why they are called so, I suppose, is, because they want to put the negro upon an equality with the white man.

MR. HOUSTON. Above—they would put them above naturalized foreigners.

MR. SMITH. Yes, sir.

MR. NICHOLS. I do not understand the party to which the gentleman from Tennessee alludes to occupy any such position as he gives for them. I am not in favor of putting the blacks upon an equality with the whites, and I am not aware that any such position is occupied by the party with which I am acting.

MR. SMITH. I do not believe that the gentleman from Ohio would be willing to do that. I am pursuing a line of argument, and not casting reflections on anybody. I give the common acceptance of the terms of the various parties in this House. I say, sir, that the large majority of the Black Republicans owe their election mainly to the secret organization to which some gentlemen from the South in main owe theirs. But what do we see now? I speak from experience on the

subject. The Know Nothings nearly rode me down in my district; and how did they do it? They did it on the eighth section of the Philadelphia American platform. It was proclaimed in every district of Tennessee that the proscription of Catholics for their religious tenets, which, they alleged, were inconsistent with their true allegiance to this Government, was the great and moving principle of the Know Nothing party. The conference of the ministers of the church whose principles I profess, but to which I do not belong, (I belong to none,) met in my county, and the influence of those men was almost irresistible in favor of the principle of the eighth section of the Philadelphia platform, and against the constitutional ideas of the Democratic party on the subject of religious toleration. If they had not done so, I should never have had the least difficulty in reference to my election. But such was the fanaticism in my country on the subject of religion,—not on the question of the exclusion of foreigners,—that, with a thousand majority of my political friends, it was with the greatest difficulty I was enabled to carry the district.

What, Mr. Clerk, did we see here day before yesterday? We saw the gentleman from Louisiana [Mr. EUSTIS] rise in his place and assert that the doctrine contained in the eighth section of the Philadelphia Know Nothing platform was a monstrous doctrine.

The CLERK. The time allotted the gentleman under the order of the House has expired.

MR. SMITH. I am speaking by unanimous consent.

The CLERK. If there is no objection, the gentleman will proceed with his remarks.

There was no objection.

MR. SMITH. I am obliged to the House. In order that I may not be misunderstood, I will read what the honorable gentleman from Louisiana [Mr. EUSTIS] did say on the subject of the religious test. In the Globe I find him using this language:

"What was the construction which the American candidate for Governor of that State placed upon the eighth article of the Philadelphia platform? We all know that, in the early part of his canvass, that candidate published a letter in which he said he never would vote for a Catholic. Thank God, that gentleman was defeated, and, sir, he ought to have been defeated. There was enough in that letter to defeat ten thousand candidates for Governor; and I trust that every man who holds such odious and monstrous doctrines will ever meet with as deep a political grave as the honorable gentleman, the American candidate for Governor of Virginia, has met with."

I was astonished to hear that doctrine from one who was of the secret organization which so bitterly denounced the religious opinions of the Catholics in my own district. Here a member of

the American party holds doctrines diametrically opposite to those of that party, published and advocated in the gubernatorial and congressional canvass of Tennessee. But my astonishment was increased when I found these dissimilar doctrines were indorsed by the honorable gentleman from Alabama, [Mr. WALKER,] who is an acknowledged leader of the Know Nothing or American party. What do we see? These gentlemen hold, that if the eighth section of the Philadelphia American platform means anything, it declares a principle which is not only subversive of the Constitution of the United States, but is, in the language of the gentleman from Louisiana, [Mr. EVRIS,] *monstrous*. And yet, what did we hear in the next breath? The Democrats met here on the Saturday night before the commencement of Congress, and passed a resolution in which they said, in most respectful terms, that they congratulated the country on the triumph of the Democratic party, in many of the States, on the principle of civil and religious liberty, which was so fiercely assaulted by the Know Nothing or American party. Two gentlemen rise in their places, and tell the House that the doctrine embodied in the eighth section of the Know Nothing platform is subversive of the Constitution, and that it is *monstrous*! And yet they say they cannot unite with us, because we have congratulated the country on our triumph over that very eighth section. That is the effect of it. We have it disclosed, and authoritatively, too, that the principle against which we fought, and in the success of which triumph we congratulated the country, is not only subversive of the Constitution, but is a monstrous principle!

I want this matter to properly go before the country. I do not want to be placed in a false position. I must use what feeble means I have to repel the ingenious assaults which are to be, and now are, made against the Democratic party. The Black Republicans, as they are called, make war on the Constitution, in reference to slavery. The Know Nothing or American party make war on the Constitution, in regard to religious toleration. That the latter, in their national council, made war on civil and religious liberty, is admitted by two gentlemen of the same party—one from Louisiana and the other from Alabama. I will say here, what I have often said at home, that the violation of either the provision of the Constitution in reference to religious toleration, or that in regard to slavery, is equally vital. I will vote for a Black Republican as soon as I would for any man who did not *in toto* repudiate the odious eighth section of the Philadelphia

platform. I never fail to express an opinion which I may honestly entertain. This opinion is one that ought to be expressed, and clearly and forcibly expressed. These two parties, I repeat, are alike objectionable, so long as they retain in their creeds these anti-constitutional doctrines. If the southern Americans abandon the eighth section of their national platform, and their other objectionable doctrines, then I meet them as political friends; for it is equally as important for us to maintain that provision of the Constitution relating to religious toleration as the one relating to slavery. Sir, I voted against laying that resolution on the table, for the purpose of giving those gentlemen a fair chance. I did not do it to get any advantage of them; for, sir, I seek no advantage of any man, and more particularly would I seek no advantage from that party which is so fast fading from existence as the late Know Nothing party. I did it in good faith, in order to give them a chance to show their hand, and to remove the difficulties which exist here. But, to the astonishment of this side of the House, enough of them voted against the resolution to prevent its passage; and therefore a large number of our friends changed their votes. I did not change mine, because I never change a vote that has been given with an understanding of all the facts of the case. I never have done it, and I never expect to do it. I have changed many votes, when I did not understand the question, but that is the only reason which, in my opinion, would justify me in changing my votes.

Now, sir, the intent of the American party, as indicated by the gentlemen who have spoken in this debate, is to cast the odium of our non-organization upon the Democratic party and upon the Administration. As I said before, I know that the President of the United States desires an organization,—not that he would interfere at all, by any means,—but as the Executive of this nation he desires to see the Government go on in the regular way, and to let the popular will have free expression through its only legitimate channel. That is his desire, I apprehend, without even a thought as to who shall preside over this body. This is an inquiry he has no right to make, except in a spirit of solicitude for the interest of the country. I say here, now, to this House, that I believe there ought to be a speedy organization, more particularly in view of the critical state of our foreign relations as disclosed in the President's message, which we have really, though not officially, read. While I believe that, I as firmly believe that the only party which can save the country is the Democratic party, and I believe that it

is important to preserve it in its unity and its strength. That was exhibited at the incoming of the present Administration. I desire to say a word or two upon that subject, and I shall then have done.

Those gentlemen who are attempting here to cast odium upon the present Administration are placing themselves in an unenviable attitude before the country, if not now, at least they will be so placed in days to come. When this Administration came into power, it found the Government, to use a common expression, lying "loose all about." It found every Department of it disorganized or unorganized. It found thirty six secret inspectors of the customs stalking the streets of Washington upon a salary of \$100,000 in the aggregate, without anything to do; it struck them off the list, and reorganized every branch of the Government and of the public service. Now, sir, you may come on with your committees—I care not who appoints them, even if he be the worst enemy of the Administration—and let them go into their investigations. Those investigations will only show what I have stated, that the Democratic party is the only party that has ever shown capacity to administer properly the affairs of this Government. I only wish the Opposition would examine the conduct and business of the various Departments of this Government.

I, sir, have never asked anything at the hands of this Administration. I have never had anything. I do not want anything. But when I see an Administration assailed in this indirect way, which has been true to the country, true to the Constitution, and true to the principles and opinions of the very gentlemen who assail it upon the great question of the day, I feel that silence would do injustice not only to the Administration, but to the country. While upon this subject I may say, that, when we ask these gentlemen what objection they have to the Administration, or to the President, they universally refer to some *appointment to office*. I want to express this opinion here, sir, that I think it unbecoming in a southern man to stickle about the appointment of any officer of this Government. Why, sir, I am willing that you shall have all the offices. The North may have them all if she wants them. Give us our *constitutional rights*, and that is all that we ask of you. I, for one, stand here to say that the President may reject every man for whose appointment I ask, and I will never complain of him so long as he sustains those constitutional rights which I believe to be dear to the people of my section, and absolutely necessary to the perpetuity of this Union. That is all I ask of

the Administration; and I submit that it is not in keeping with the dignity, the character, and the chivalry, if I may so speak, of southern men, to stickle about the appointment of officers by a man who, amidst all the prejudices of his own section, stands by the peculiar institution of the South, as guarantied by the Constitution. When I am told that the President of the United States has expressed his opposition to slavery, I say that he is only entitled to the more credit for the support of the guarantees of the Constitution that protect us in the enjoyment of that institution. The man who owns a thousand or ten slaves is entitled to no credit for the support of the institution. It is his interest to do it. But the man who has been raised at the North, in the midst of all the prejudices which have been excited there by demagogues and politicians against this institution, and yet has the boldness, the courage, and the patriotism, to stand by the guarantees of the Constitution for the protection of our rights and our institutions, is entitled to high credit, and a warm support from those who desire a perpetuity of the Union. I have but little patience with southern men who cavil about offices when such great principles as these are at stake.

The position which the President has taken since his election, and in his late message, has been the position that he has uniformly taken during the course of a long public life—in the Legislature of New Hampshire, in the two branches of Congress, and in the executive chair; and I challenge the proof of any inconsistency on his part in relation to this question. And yet we see southern gentlemen here assailing him most furiously for what they call his Abolition tendencies. I feel, sir, that there is an error in the minds of a portion of the people of the South who belong to the American party in relation to this, and I wish it to be corrected. I do not mean to impute improper motives to any of those gentlemen, but it is due to the history of the country that this thing shall go no further. I am willing to meet all men who make war upon no provision of the Constitution, as I understand it; and upon the subject of this Catholic test, upon equal terms, personally or politically, I beg leave simply to state what I said in a few words during the last Congress on this Catholic question, as I was one of the first to discuss this subject in the House of Representatives. I said it then, I say it now, and I intend always to say it:

"I do not come as the advocate of the Catholic religion; or the apologist of the Catholic faith, believing, as I always have, in the religious doctrines of my ancestors. I, at an early day, imbibed a prejudice against the tenets of the Catholic church, and these early impressions have never

been removed. I dissent from its doctrines, discard its heresies, and *denounce* its persecution.

"I am a Protestant because I believe its teachings to be the teachings of the Bible, and its religion the religion of our Savior. But while I am strong in my own faith, I scorn to proscribe others who differ from me in religious sentiment. I do not seek to dive down into the hearts of men to ferret out their religious dogmas, but would secure to every denomination their constitutional right to worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience."

For this I was denounced at home as being favorable to Catholicism, and many votes were cast against me on account of a deluded belief that I favored their religious dogmas. Yet, now it is said upon this floor, by honorable gentlemen who are acknowledged leaders of the so-called American party, that any other doctrine than this, which I asserted during the last Congress, and for which I was furiously denounced by that party in Tennessee, is not only subversive

of the Constitution, but is *monstrous*. It is for this reason that I have read it, because every man in my district and in my State will see at once that the point made against me has now not only been abandoned, but *denounced*, by some of the leaders of that party on this floor; and yet they complain of us for objecting to that feature of their national platform which the "sober second thought" of the people has compelled them to abandon. With all due deference to those gentlemen, I think it is time now that they should agree upon some common ground, and let us know what it is, so that the country may not be longer misled.

Now, I must return my most grateful thanks to the House for the privilege they have accorded me in order to make this explanation, and for the attention with which they have listened to the remarks I have had the honor to submit.

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